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FOREIGN SERVICE DESPATCH

FROM : AmEmbassy BAGHDAD

TO : THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON

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DESP. NO.

August 3, 1956

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SUBJECT: Iraqi Press Reaction to Suez Canal Nationalization - 1

Ever since the fiery speech delivered by Jamal Abdul NASSER in Alexandria, the Iraqi press has been aflame with the news of the Egyptian decision to nationalize the Suez Canal. Baghdad's Arabic-language newspapers have followed with avid interest the rapidly-moving procession of events under headlines such as: "Egypt Will Fight If Necessary"; "Kruschev Warns West not to Use Force"; "Dulles Flies to London"; "Egyptian Sterling Accounts Blocked"; and "Syria Calls For Meeting of AL Political Committee." Editorial space was almost entirely given over to discussion of and speculation upon what was generally regarded as one of the most significant events in the recent history of the Middle East (see Enclosure No. 1).

It was abundantly clear that the Iraqi press and apparently Iraqi public opinion approved whole-heartedly of the Egyptian action and its author as well. The reason was simply that, after suffering what had appeared to be a crippling set-back to his cherished Aswan Dam project, Nasser had retaliated against the West in what seemed to be even more telling fashion. Thus, playing to a wildly-applauding Arab audience, the Egyptian leader has just performed the most popular stunt in any nationalistic repertoire; he had stuck his head into the mouth of the "imperialistic" lion and had dared the beast to bite. Such a "bold" action appeals to the very hearts of all Arab nationalists, among whom the Iraqis do not count themselves the least. The overall tone of Iraqi public comment might best be described as exultant, if not militant, Arab nationalism.

In one of the first editorials to appear, al-Akhbar (independent) crowed that "Nasser has dealt the West a bigger blow than they did to him," and subsequently hoped that he would not retreat in the face of "empty Western threats." Al-Bilad predicted that any counter-measures by the West against Egypt would result in "reactions within the Arab States which may break the last thread that ties them to the West." To al-Zaman (independent) the Egyptian move was more significant than the arms deal with the Communists. Al-Hurriyah (moderately-leftist) clarified: "Imperialists should know Egypt is not alone in the field." Blaming a "pro-Jewish, Anglo-American policy" for forcing Egypt to take such a step, al-Yaqdha (nationalist) warned that "the slightest move against Egypt will mobilize Arab opinion behind her." In a later editorial, al-Yaqdha professed to believe that Western consternation over nationalization proved that the West did not intend to hand the Canal over to Egypt even upon expiration of the lease.

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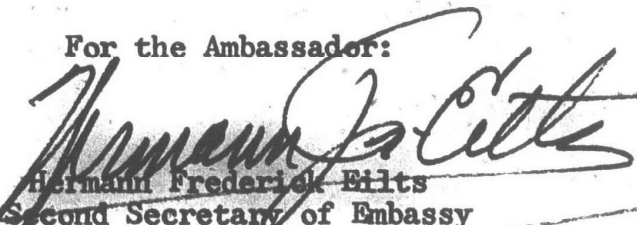
in 1968. Al-Hurriyah likewise expressed a suspicion that the West had a "plan to force the renewal of the contract upon Egypt." While calling for Arab solidarity in the issue, al-Bilad averred that the United States is "waiting for a more convenient moment to attack the Arabs." More moderate, al-Zaman appealed to the West to "handle the situation wisely."

Once again al-Hurriyah declared that "the Arabs support Egypt and denounce this crusade against the nationalization of the Canal." In a bitter editorial al-Yaqdha saw Jewish machinations in the Suez issue and cautioned that the use of force against Egypt would lead to a third world war. Deploing the "drastic measures" advocated by the British and French, al-Zaman praised the moderate attitude of the United States on the Suez question.

Several newspapers ran statements by prominent Iraqis commenting upon the nationalization of the Suez Canal. Although Prime Minister Nuri al-SAID, in London, declined to comment, various other leaders, both for and against the Government, made their views known (see Enclosure No. 2). The majority of these statements were to the effect that Egypt had the "sovereign right" to nationalize the Canal, while a few called upon the West to revise its policy toward the Arabs.

An interesting sidelight to this issue is the fact that Muhammad Mahdi KUBBA (ex-Istiqlal leader) and Kamil CHADIRCHI (ex-NDP leader) cabled congratulations to Nasser on behalf of "the founding committee of the National Congress Party." It will be recalled that the National Congress Party was recently refused permission to organize by the Minister of Interior.

For the Ambassador:


Hermann Frederick Bilts
Second Secretary of Embassy

Enclosures: 

- ✓ 1. Excerpts of Baghdad Press Comment
2. Statements by Prominent Iraqis

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Excerpts of Baghdad Press Comment
of Egyptian Nationalization of Suez Canal

al-Akhbar (independent) - July 28, 1956:

"President Abdul Nasser has dealt the West a bigger blow than they did to him. This reply to Western attempts to discredit his regime has come as a great surprise.

"Abdul Nasser realizes that Egypt must depend on herself for development and progress and not on others. The profits of this Company amount to 25-million dinars; so why should he not nationalize it, provided he compensates the shareholders?

"Egypt has used her constitutional rights as a sovereign state. She has proved to the West, or anyone else, her will to resist Anglo-American pressure and proved that the Arab countries can refuse to be subject to the West because they have ample resources to meet their development needs."

al-Akhbar - July 29:

"Having nationalized the Suez Canal, Egypt now has the right to impose its will on any ship loaded with goods to Israel. Egypt has full rights to inspect all ships destined to Israel, to confiscate their cargoes, and thus to carry out the economic blockade against Israel.

"We congratulate President Nasser on his move and, at the same time, hope he will not retreat in the face of the empty Western threats; the Egyptian and all Arab peoples support him in this connection."

al-Bilad (independent) - July 29:

"The nationalization of the Suez Canal has been a very well calculated surprise brought about for the reasons which Abdul Nasser mentioned in his speech. The revenue of the Suez Canal may be utilized in building the High Dam and other projects. Most circles believe that this move was naturally essential for Egypt to take as a sovereign state, regardless of the uproar which the West would make. Many may level criticism at the Egyptian Government and some of her activities, but there is nobody whatsoever that would blame her for this step which Britain herself has forced on her. If the West takes any counter-measures against Egypt, reactions against the West could occur within the Arab States which may break the last thread that ties them with the West. All Arab States must support Egypt irrespective of disputes. This crisis is not Egypt's alone, it pertains to the whole Arab nation."

al-Zaman (independent) - July 29:

"The nationalization of the Suez Canal is of greater significance than

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the Czechoslovak arms deal because, apart from its having touched vital Western interests, it came as a reply to the withdrawal of the Western offer to finance the High Dam and proved that Egypt could take the initiative in such issues. The West has lost a good chance of bettering relations with the Arabs by refusing to finance the High Dam. By the nationalization of the Suez Canal, the West will gradually lose its economic position in Egypt. The United States is largely responsible for this short-sighted policy of having refused to finance the High Dam project which led to this result. The West has proved that it always ignores Arab causes and vital interests which mean so much to the Arabs. Egypt had to face this defiance. The West is largely to blame for too much prejudice against the Arabs in favor of Israel. Abdul Nasser never thought of boycotting the West but recognizes its legal economic interests. The West must, in face of these developments, reconsider its policy and treat the Arab States as equal partners."

al-Hurriyah (moderately-leftist) - July 29:

"Never has an Egyptian action got as much enthusiastic applause from both friends and enemies of the present regime in Egypt.

"The Suez Canal has been a source of continuous trouble to Egypt and the direct reason and excuse for the West to impose its will upon the Egyptian people.

"We are not surprised at all to see London so furious, Paris so mad and Washington so shocked. It is only natural for imperialists to feel like this when a strong man threatens their interests.

"Imperialists should know Egypt is not alone in the field."

al-Yaqdha (nationalist) - July 29:

"The Western States were shocked by the nationalization of the Suez Canal. They threatened to bring the dispute to the Security Council and to send ships to challenge Egyptian authority in the Canal. The West, egged on by world Jewry, may take more foolish measures, but no one can deny the right of Egypt as a sovereign state to nationalize the Suez as long as compensation is paid to shareholders.

"The Arabs had no choice but to oppose the pro-Jewish Anglo-American policy which has brought disaster to Western interests in the Arab World. The West still persists in ignoring new developments in the Arab World. The slightest move against Egypt will mobilize Arab opinion behind her. Any challenge to Egypt would have far-reaching results because the Arabs have grown bitter with disappointment."

al-Yaqdha - July 30:

"What has happened that has so stirred up Britain, France and America? Many countries have nationalized companies and compensated shareholders, but

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no one has protested so much.

"But in the Arab countries the matter is different. An Arab country must not do anything without permission from its guardians the British, the French and the Americans. If they say they want us to remain peasants, we must remain peasants, for industry leads us to Communism, they say.

"They are angry, not because Egypt nationalized the Canal but because, in violation of the traditional practice of consulting with its guardians, Egypt behaved as a wise and independent state. It seems that the West did not intend to hand the Canal over to Egypt, even after the twelve years agreed upon, but intended to raise the problem of freedom of navigation and continue its domination of the Canal.

"President Nasser said that the decision would not affect navigation rights through the canal, but it is clear that the West is pushed by its love of Israel to oppose the move.

"Nothing else will do; we have decided to live in honour and dignity. We shall hold friendship with true friends and enmity with those who refuse to be our friends."

al-Hurriyah - July 30:

"It is fantastic, this Western fuss and foolish action in answer to the Egyptian action in nationalizing the Canal, as if the world has come to an end.

"Why all this fuss? The Canal contract would have ended in 1968 anyhow. and of course Egypt would have taken over then.

"Would the West have made this fuss then? Or had they a plan to force the renewal of the contract upon Egypt?

"They talk about freedom of movement through the Canal. Well, Egypt has asserted that she will not interfere with this freedom and that everything will continue as normal.

"We hoped that the West would be wise enough to accept this action in a 'modern spirit,' but unfortunately the statements made by Western politicians have proved to us that they are still living in the Middle Ages.

"This challenge from the West must be met with yet a firmer challenge."

al-Bilad - July 30:

"While the Western powers become furious at Egyptian nationalization of the Canal, the Arabs were exceedingly happy to see Egypt take this brave step.

"The move is one of the most dangerous moves that has hit the West after

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the Second World War.

"France has threatened, Britain has blocked Egypt's sterling reserves and the United States is 'waiting for a more convenient moment' to attack the Arabs, while the Arabs, even those who have military pacts and agreements with her, have not yet declared officially their attitude or taken any steps.

"Egypt is a part of the Arab world. It is our duty to support her in every way we can."

al-Zaman - July 31:

"Western action against Egypt may lead to a dangerous situation. Egypt's action is within her sovereign rights and was forced by Western refusal to finance a vital project. Abdul Nasser has stressed the fact that Egypt will never boycott the West, despite uncalled for Western action. He ignored the Soviet offer of help preferring to depend on Egypt's own efforts and resources.

"The West should not sever the remaining ties with Egypt, which is prepared to go to any lengths to protect her sovereignty. The situation must be handled wisely or it may produce undesirable developments."

al-Hurriyah - July 31:

"Sir Anthony Eden's declaration that the West is not prepared to see the Suez Canal under the control of a single power means that he intends to rob Egypt, not only now but in the future, of her legitimate sovereign rights to part of her lands. There is no provision in international law which allows it. He has given Egypt and the Arab world a new reason for persevering with the nationalization of the Canal to prevent it from being used as a threat to Arab independence.

"British action shows loss of nerve and tends to widen the gulf between the Arabs and the West. The Arabs support Egypt and denounce this crusade against the nationalization of the Canal. The West must choose between persistence with these methods or sense and wisdom in order to keep Arab friendship."

al-Yaqdha - July 31:

"The bastions of imperialism in the West are falling one by one owing to the surge of nationalism among the people. Every true Arab has hailed the nationalization of the Suez Canal, but the French, the British and the Jews have made noisy protests intensified by threat of force and economic sanctions against Egypt and the Arabs. The use of force would lead to a third world war, while economic measures affect both sides. Intrigues and the planning of coups d'etat from within would result in instability which would endanger Western interests.

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"The establishment of Israel gave the Arabs a complex which will now accept nothing short of complete removal of the causes which produced it. The West must choose either the Arabs or the Jews but the Arab world has room for only Arabs."

al-Akhbar - August 1:

"The immediate response of the Arab countries to support Egypt in her move was not less important than the decision to nationalize the Canal itself.

"It was this support that forced the West to retreat a little and confine the dispute to the freedom of navigation through the Canal.

"Syria is now inviting the Arab League Political Council to take a collective decision that will strengthen Egypt's international prestige and resist any action the West may take against her.

"Needless to say, this Syrian appeal reveals sincere and true national intentions and shows how great Arab cooperation can be in the international field."

al-Zaman - August 1:

"The tripartite talks now being held in London to discuss the Egyptian decision have so far shown that Britain and France advocate the adoption of 'drastic measures' towards Egypt, while the United States does not seem to be willing to share their opinion.

"America's attitude completely differs from that of Britain and France; it opposes using force against Egypt. Whether the motives for this attitude are due to good will or to economical designs we do not know; but it will undoubtedly help the West to reconsider the crisis and do no more than request security of free passage through the Canal.

"We welcome the attitude of America and hope the West will be more wise and settle the matter with Nasser in a peaceful way."

al-Hurriyah - August 1:

This paper warned the West not to handle the dispute over the Suez Canal "in a hysterical and irrational manner". It expressed surprise that the West should show such concern at "Egypt's action in exercising its natural rights." It warned the Western powers that the Arabs "will not stand by to see Egypt subject to aggression."

al-Yaqdha - August 1:

"The Western contention that it is not possible to leave the control of the Suez Canal to one power which may utilize it for its national ends indicates that the West intended to raise difficulties for Egypt even after the

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end of the Suez Canal Company concession in 1968. This justified the Egyptian action in nationalizing the Canal now as Egypt will have to face Western opposition to Egyptian control of the Canal anyway. Any action taken against Egypt will be considered by all the Arabs as directed against them also."

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Statements by Prominent Iraqis
on the Nationalization of the Suez Canal

Prime Minister Nuri al-SAID - The press reported on July 29, from London, that Nuri had declined to comment.

Senator Ali Jawdat al-AYYUBI (ex-Prime Minister and former Minister to U.S.) - "Egypt had every natural right to make this decision."

Senator Nuruddin MAHMUD (ex-Prime Minister) - "This is a move which all Arab States must support. If the West does not revise its policy toward the Arabs, the gulf will become yet wider."

Abdul Majid MAHMUD (former Minister of Development, pro-Jamali) - "This move was the result of the Western attitude towards Egypt. Since the Canal belongs to Egypt, the Egyptian Government has a right to decide upon its nationalization. It might, however, have been better for Egypt if the decision had been taken after agreement with all the countries concerned."

Abdul Kurim al-UZRI (former Cabinet Minister, pro-Jamali) - "The decision to nationalize the Canal was a sovereign right of Egypt, as long as the shareholders are compensated. The West must understand that the decision was a natural result of its negligence of Arab aspirations."

Senator Muhammad Ridha al-SHABIBI (ex-UPF leader) - "I preliminarily approve of the Egyptian move, which should support and strengthen the Egyptian economy."

Tawfiq MUKHTAR (Chairman of the Military Committee in the Chamber of Deputies) - "Nationalization of the Suez Canal is a natural and constitutional right of Egypt. This move together with the arms deal, overshadows in importance the Egyptian revolution, itself."

Faig SAMARRAI (ex-Istiqlal, pro-leftist) - "The Suez Canal Company was a government within a government. As Egypt became technically competent to exercise control, there was no reason for the continued existence of the Company."

Ismail al-GHANIM (Deputy from Baghdad) - "Egypt should proceed cautiously in nationalizing the Suez Canal Company lest imperialists find a way to block the action as was done in Iran. For support against these imperialists, Egypt should rely not only on her people, but the other Arab states."

Aladdin al-WISAWASSI (Deputy from Baghdad) - "The national interests of Egypt dictated the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company. It was an internal affair in which no other state can interfere."

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Muhammad HAD ID (ex-NDP leader) - "Nationalization of the Canal is a popular step among the Arabs and should be a good start toward financing the Aswan Dam and other necessary industries."

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